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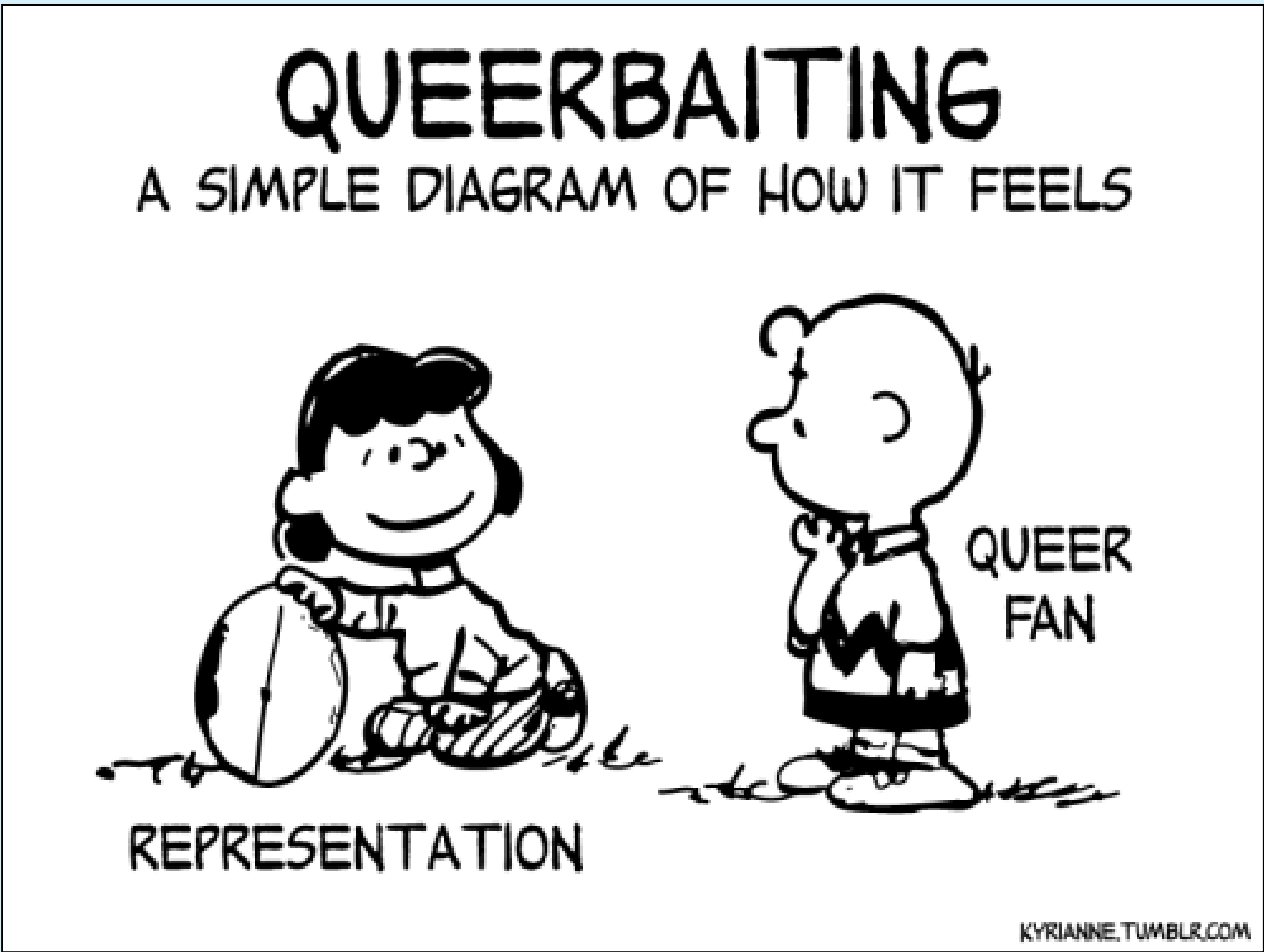
Queer-baiting on the BBC's *Sherlock*

Addressing the Invalidation of Queer Identities through Online Fan Fiction Communities

by Cassidy Sheehan

What is Queer-baiting?

Queer-baiting, a sometimes unintentional tactic used to spice up a plotline or attract viewers from a certain demographic, occurs when media producers create a homoerotic subtext between two characters within a narrative with no intention of actualizing that subtext. However, even if writers have good intentions, queer-baiting is harmful to members of the queer community.



Queer-baiting on *Sherlock*

The show—created and written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat and starring Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as John Watson—is a modern-day reimagining of the classic Sherlock Holmes detective stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Contradictory statements from actors and showrunners as well as examples from the show itself are evidence of queer-baiting.

- Steven Moffat : states “I don’t think there is anything that suggests Sherlock is gay” and “agree[s] that he always wanted to play on the confusion of Holmes and Watson’s relationship and never intended to confirm either character’s sexuality.”¹
- Mark Gatiss: says the writers have “had lots of fun with the notion that, in the 21st century, people naturally assume they’re [Sherlock and John] a couple.”²
- Martin Freeman: calls *Sherlock* “the gayest story in the history of television.”³
- Benedict Cumberbatch: blames jokes in the script which “fuel the fantasy of the few into flames for the many.”⁴
- Cumberbatch and Freeman: “feed the hype surrounding their characters’ bromance by teasing there was a scene filmed in a gay club from Watson’s stag party that was cut from series three.”⁵



Characterizing the relationship between John and Sherlock as merely platonic ignores narrative cues.⁶ The concept of a “bromance” also denies queer possibility by insisting that two men who are emotionally intimate remain heterosexual, without considering homoromanticism or homosexuality as options.

¹ Sperling n.p.
² Wilson n.p.
³ Wightman n.p.
⁴ “Why It’s Not”
⁵ Wightman n.p.
⁶ “Why It’s Not”

	SHERLOCK: “I need to get some air. We’re going out tonight.” JOHN: “Actually, I’ve, uh...got a date.” SHERLOCK: “What?” JOHN: “It’s where two people who like each other go out and have fun.” SHERLOCK: “That’s what I was suggesting.” JOHN: (pauses) “No, it wasn’t. At least, I hope not.” ⁷
	MRS. HUDSON: “What do you think then, Dr. Watson? There’s another bedroom upstairs, if you’ll be needing two bedrooms.” JOHN: “Of course we’ll be needing two...” MRS. HUDSON: “Oh, don’t worry, there’s all sorts round here. Mrs. Turner, next door’s, got married ones.” ⁸
	ANGELO: “Sherlock, anything on the menu, whatever you want, free, on the house, for you, and for your date.” SHERLOCK : (to John) “Do you want to eat?” JOHN: “I’m not his date.” ... ANGELO: “I’ll get a candle for the table. It’s more romantic.” JOHN: “I’m not his date!” ⁹
	IRENE: “You jealous?” JOHN: “We’re not a couple.” IRENE: “Yes, you are.” JOHN: “Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes, but, for the record, anyone out there who still cares, I’m not actually gay!” ¹⁰

Queer Identity Development

A Psychological Process

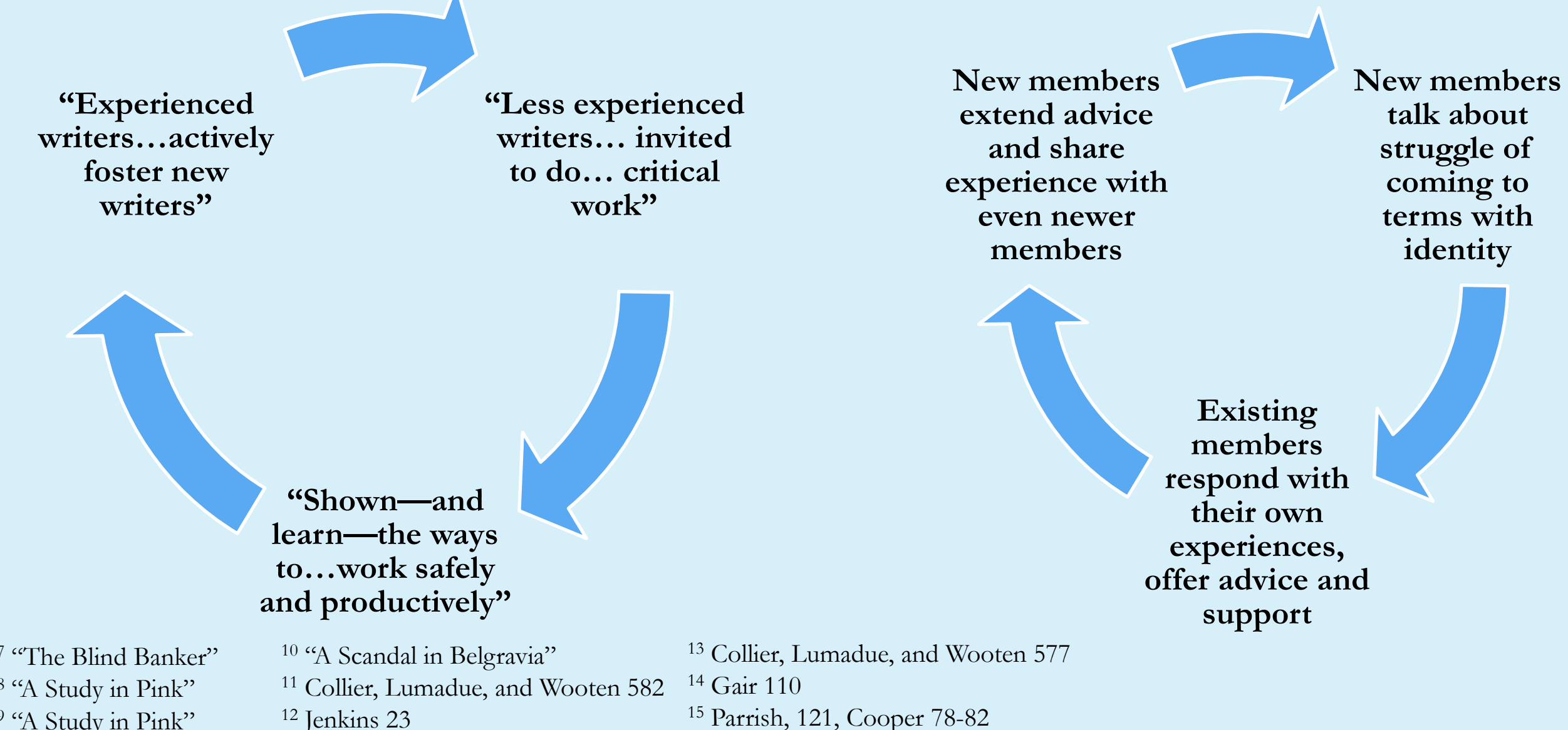
In order to undergo “healthy human development,” queer individuals find sources to mirror and validate their identities.¹¹ When lacking other sources, media such as television may be used. According to Henry Jenkins, “fans construct their cultural and social identities through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images.”¹²

The Dangers of Invalidation

Television shows such as *Sherlock* embody heterosexual norms which are internalized by audiences.¹³ These norms are impossible for queer viewers to rectify with their lived experiences and so invalidate these fans identities. This conflict may result in inhibition, self-doubt, depression, rage, despair, and low self-esteem.¹⁴

Addressing Invalidation Online

Fans are able to explore and develop their identities similarly in both online fan fiction communities and online queer communities.¹⁵ The settings’ structure allows safe spaces for queer individuals to flourish.



⁷ “The Blind Banker”
⁸ “A Study in Pink”
⁹ “A Study in Pink”
¹⁰ “A Scandal in Belgravia”
¹¹ Collier, Lumadue, and Wooten 582
¹² Jenkins 23
¹³ Collier, Lumadue, and Wooten 577
¹⁴ Gair 110
¹⁵ Parnish, 121, Cooper 78-82

Reifying through Fan Fiction

In the safe spaces provided by online communities, queer *Sherlock* fans can validate their identities, subvert heterosexual norms, and engage in queer activism.

<p>From “13, 19, 38” by InnocuousPilcrow</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Sherlock gasped quietly, feeling his breath speed up a bit, suddenly a bit panicky. <i>Was</i> he gay? No, he couldn’t be. He didn’t really want to sleep with anyone. That made him—what? Not gay, anyway. Definitely not gay.He hid his head in his hands, warm tears pricking his eyes. What was he going to do? He was already hated at school, an outcast that no one talked to, except to make fun of. If anyone found out, it would just be one more bullet in their huge arsenal of ways to torture the freak.Victor pulled away, his hands coming up to roughly shove Sherlock’s shoulders into the back of the sofa, and he was standing, moving to the other side of the room, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand...“And you thought I was queer too? Why the fuck would you think that? With all your stupid fucking deductions, you couldn’t have figured out that I think fucking homos are fucking disgusting?”	<p>From “I Thought Wrong” by hellafab</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">John had figured in his hungover haze the next morning that it had been nothing but a drunken mistake and tried to forget the tingling feeling at the pit of his stomach whenever the memory drifted subtly into his thoughts...He wasn’t gay. He knew this, he was certain of it, but then again...he’d really only dated women.
	<p>From “Homophobia” by achievableformofflight</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Thanks for this chapter to ... all of you who messaged me to tell me your stories. I was and still am speechless at your honesty and your incredible bravery in the face of things that are entirely more real than anything that happens in this 'verse [fictional universe], and infinitely more terrifying for it.

Conclusion

Although not much can be done about the perpetuation of harmful norms on *Sherlock*, fandom plays a role in creating safe spaces online where queer individuals can explore their identities through slash fan fiction and find support and validation in fellow fan fiction readers and writers. It’s crucial that these communities continue to grow and flourish so that all individuals may experience the positive development and validation that come with participating in online fandom.



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